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RAILROAD QUIET ZONES

Engineers no longer have to blow horns routinely at 14 urban crossings, to the relief of sleeping residents

Can't hear that train a-comin'

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Residents who live along the Union Pacific railroad tracks from Memorial Park to Willowbend might be able to get a better night's sleep once a rule prohibiting most train horns begins Aug. 1.

Tuesday morning at the San Felipe crossing, Houston Mayor Bill White signed a letter declaring 14 railroad crossings quiet zones, restricting when a conductor can blow the train's horn.

The zone means that engineers are required to sound the horn only if they see something directly in the path of the train. The zones are in portions of Houston and the cities of West University Place and Bellaire.

"I heard the train as it blared and tooted its horn through Bellaire (at 5:30 a.m. Tuesday), and I said, 'Thank the Lord I'm soon not going to have to hear that train,' " said Bellaire Mayor Cindy Siegel, who lives 5 1/2 blocks from the railroad tracks.

Safety devices including flashing lights, bells, bars and signage were installed at the 14 crossings to discourage vehicles and pedestrians from crossing the track when a train is approaching. Nearly three dozen trains use the track daily.

"On Aug. 1, there are thousands of people that will have a brand-new perspective on sleep if nothing else," said Houston City Councilwoman Pam Holm, whose District G covers part of the area.

The quiet-zone effort began in early 2002 when West University Place residents Kristen Palmer and Brian Antweil, who both live on Oberlin near the track, began seeking support to quiet the trains.

They set up a citizen feedback e-mail address and said they received responses from hundreds of residents in the three cities involved, which they then took to city leaders.

"It's a common-sense solution to a problem that is getting ever worse," Palmer said.

"It's been a long, arduous process as everybody knows, and it is a very, very welcome event to take place that will improve the neighborhoods and businesses in this end of Houston," Peter Popkin, president of the West Lane Place Civic Association, said.

As for expanding the quiet zone to other parts of town, White said residents should talk to their local civic organizations and council members and the city would consider everything on a case-by-case basis.

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